

Merton on Mercy and Justice

ITMS 15th General Meeting, June 2017

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We're perhaps accustomed to thinking of mercy as a virtue. The merciful person, we think, is a virtuous person. Thomas Merton, I believe, offers us a different and unique perspective.

In our time together, I'll describe and assess this perspective through a reading of some key passages from three of Merton's best-known texts on mercy - along with a fourth which, I think, has received too little attention. The titles of these texts and the passages I'll discuss are included on your handout. The well-known texts are the first three: the chapter "Mercy" from *No Man is an Island* of 1955; a homily entitled "The Good Samaritan" from 1961, included in *Seasons of Celebration*; and an essay, "The Climate of Mercy" from 1964, included in *Love and Living*. The lesser-known text is a brief essay on the work of novelist Julien Green, "To Each His Darkness." This appeared in *Raids on the Unspeakable* in 1966.

We're moving chronologically, then, and I think what we find in doing so is a slow unfolding of Merton's thinking about mercy, and a formation of the unique perspective I've mentioned. This attains its fullest clarity, I'll argue, in that fourth and final text, "To Each His Darkness."

Rather than primarily a virtue, I'll argue, mercy appears in Merton as something impractical, foolish, illogical, and inconsistent - at least according to the standards we're accustomed to think of as "serious." The merciful person turns out to be closest to the sinner, farthest from the self-consciously virtuous and respectable. In this way, I believe Merton's perspective is very close to that of Pope Francis. It can help us better appreciate the pope's devotion to mercy.

I

In our first text, the chapter "Mercy," we can emphasize two elements of Merton's unfolding perspective. The first is what seems to be an abiding suspicion of philosophy, understood as a finally impersonal discipline of the mind. This echoes throughout the texts we'll consider. In our first passage, we find a kind of reveille; a rousing call from slumber. Merton speaks of compassion, and specifically a compassion reflecting God's own. Such a compassion, he writes in passage one,

[1] "is not learned without suffering. It is not to be found in a complacent life, in which we platonically forgive the sins of others without any sense that we ourselves are involved in

a world of sin. If we want to know God, we must learn to understand the weaknesses and sins and imperfections of other men as if they were our own.”

The problem here is one of distance, or imagined distance. It is the temptation to remove ourselves from the sins of others, staying safe and secure on what we suppose to be higher ground. There’s a complacency here; a kind of philosophic remove from the world’s messiness. But this will not do. We’re involved in this world; we’re *in* it. And we’re in it together.

This leads to our second element: Merton’s view that we ourselves are not the primary agent or source of mercy, though it’s we who make it manifest. The *primary agent and* source of mercy is God himself, not us. We do not acquire, develop, and possess mercy in the same way we acquire, develop, and possess virtue. Rather, we *channel* mercy. As Merton writes in our second passage:

[2] “If my compassion is true, if it be a deep compassion of the heart and not a legal affair, or a mercy learned from a book and practiced on others like a pious exercise, then my compassion for others is God’s mercy for me. My patience with them is His patience with me. My love for them is His love for me.”

We pass along the gift of mercy we receive, then, and *in* this giving we receive the gift anew and more abundantly. “My compassion for others is God’s mercy for me.”

At once, then, we’re reminded: mercy *involves* us, but it’s not *about* us. One can’t be “skilled” in mercy. One *can*, however, be an ever-more open channel of the mercy one receives.

II

From here we can turn to our next text, the homily “The Good Samaritan.” Merton speaks against *classifying* people in morally-charged categories – Samaritan and Jew, maybe Christian and Muslim. Pushing this to its limit, he challenges a false way of overcoming this tendency, and emphasizes what he takes to be Christ’s message in the parable. So we read in passage three:

[3] “Do you think perhaps this is the meaning of the parable: that all men are to be loved because they are men? Because they are human, and have the same nature? No, this is not the meaning. That would be simply a matter of extending the classification to its broadest limits, and including all men in one big category, “Man.” Christ however means more than this, for he gives a more than philosophical answer. His answer is a divine revelation, not a natural ethical principle. It is a revelation of the mystery of God. ... It is a reve-

lation of what the prophet Hosea says, speaking for the invisible God, "I will have mercy and not sacrifices."

The action of the Good Samaritan is not strictly-speaking "ethical". It reaches beyond the ethical, breaking free of every code and norm. One is tempted to invoke Kierkegaard, here: his "teleological suspension of the ethical," that reaches beyond the aesthetic and ethical ways of life toward the fully "religious." So there's more than philosophy, here. We're in the territory of Jerusalem, not Athens; of faith, not reason.

This is born out in Merton's discussion of the Hebrew word "*hesed*," usually translated as "mercy," but which he emphasizes has a fuller meaning, including fidelity and strength. The one who manifests *hesed* is a "*hasid*," a "saint," and in Merton's account there is something more and different than virtue at work in the life of such a person. There's something impractical, unreasonable, even socially disreputable. Let's consider our next two passages, numbers four and five:

[4] "[T]he love of the *chasid* for the sinner (and of the sinner for the *chasid*) is not the patronizing concern of the pious and respectable, but the impractical concern of one who acts as if he thought he were the sinner's mother and brother and sister."

[5] "The folly of the *chasid* is manifested in his love and concern for his neighbor, the sinner. For the sinner is "next to" the *chasid* or the saint. They are so close to one another, so like one another, that they are sometimes almost indistinguishable. The professionally pious man, on the contrary, makes a whole career out of being distinguishable from sinners. He wants it to be very clear to God and to man that he and the sinner are in different categories."

The love of the saint for the sinner is fraternal, sororal, filial. It's family love, not the enactment of an ethical principle. The distance between sinner and saint is closed, so much that the two blend in the eyes of the "professionally pious." Both are messy; both are "sick souls" in William James's sense. Neither makes sense in the way we're taught to do.

The saint is uncategorizable, irrational, illegible to the world. She is an outsider. Merton expresses this in passage six:

[6] "*Chesed* [mercy] has numbered us among the aliens and strangers: *chesed* has not only robbed us of our reason but declassified us along with everyone else, in the sight of God. Thus we have no home, no family, no niche in society, and no recognizable function. Nor do we even appear to be especially charitable, and we cannot pride ourselves on virtue."

To be a saint, a channel of God's mercy, is not a very rosy social prospect. It's not a badge one can wear. Rather, we can say, it's a cross.

III

What role can such mercy play in our world? Merton addresses this question in "The Climate of Mercy," our third text. In short, he holds, mercy is both the beginning and end of our life together; both its origin and its purpose. On the one hand, it is the foundation of that life. As we read in passage seven:

[7] "No structure can stand that is not built on the rock of God's mercy and steadfast love (*hesed*), and his unfailing promises" (p. 204).

Yet also mercy is the purpose of our social structures and arrangements. They are *for* mercy, one can say, and, in the final analysis, are held to that standard alone. We see this in passage eight. Merton writes:

[8] "There must obviously be some visible authority and there must be some form of law in any institutional structure. This authority and law must be justified, as also the sacraments and the sabbath are, by being *propter homines*. They must serve only to protect and preserve the climate of mercy, or life-giving forgiveness and reconciliation" (pp. 211-12).

As both origin and purpose of our common life, this "climate of mercy" *fulfills* the law that structures that life, as the new law of Christian confession is held to fulfill the old. One can grasp Merton's meaning here by considering what he says of the law of our day: "The true 'Law' of our day," we read in passage nine, "is the law of wealth and material power."

[9] "It is the market that in reality determines the existence, indeed the survival, of all men and dictates the ideals and actualities of social life. In our time the struggle of mercy is ... not against rigid and inflexible morality, but against a different and more subtle hardening of heart: a general lost of trust and of love that is rooted in greed and belief in money" (p. 217).

It's like we're reading *Evangelii Gaudium*! More on that presently. For now we can say: this struggle of mercy is a struggle indeed, and what form it should take is not clear. Yet struggle we must,

Merton maintains, for this struggle is our calling. Mercy, he says in one place, is an “event.” It interrupts the law. It reminds the law of its purpose. Thus we read in our final passage here:

[10] “Can the power of evangelical mercy possibly break through this iron ring of satanic determinism? We must believe that it can, or else we are not fully Christians. ... [O]ur optimism must not be utopian or sentimental ... [yet] we are obliged as Christians to seek some way of giving the mercy and compassion of Christ a social, even a political dimension” (p. 218).

IV

So we come to our final text, “To Each His Darkness.” Here, as I’ve said, I believe Merton’s unique perspective on mercy is most clearly evident. It takes the form of a stark distinction. On the one hand, we find “the world of consistency.” This is a world of logic, efficiency, science, even justice. It is a closed world, a world that “makes sense.” On the other hand, we find the “realm of mercy,” which interrupts this consistency. Merton introduces these ideas in passage eleven:

[11] “[T]he reality of the real world is not consistent. The world of consistency is the world of justice, but justice is not the final word. There is, above the consistent and logical world of justice, an inconsistent illogical world where nothing ‘hangs together,’ where justice no longer damns each man to his own darkness. This inconsistent world is the realm of mercy” (p. 31)

There is no escape from this world of consistency. In it, each faces her darkness and is “damned” to it. This is a world of obsession, of an aspiration to control; it’s also a world, Merton says, of “magic” and superstition; a world of *our own* making and design. By definition, this world can acknowledge nothing of significance “outside” itself, no exception, no exit, and, Merton emphasizes, no God. We see this in our next passage, number twelve:

[12] “The world can only be ‘consistent’ *without God*. His freedom will always threaten it with inconsistency — with unexpected gifts. A god who is fitted into our world scheme in order to make it serious and consistent is *not God*.” (pp. 31-2).

And yet! This world of consistency does not have the final word. Like the “law,” discussed above, there is, both before and after it, a truer realm: “the reality of the real world” as we’ve seen Merton call it. This messy, illogical, disreputable, inconsistent world - this world of folly - is “the realm of mercy.” It interrupts the world of consistency. As we read in passage thirteen:

[13] “[M]ercy breaks into the world of magic and justice and overturns its apparent consistency. Mercy is inconsistent. It is therefore comic. It liberates us from the tragic seriousness of the obsessive world which we have ‘made up’ for ourselves ... Only mercy can liberate us from the madness of our determination to be consistent. ... It liberates us from all the rigid and deterministic structures which magic strives to impose on reality (or which science, the child of magic, tries to impose!)” (p. 32).

Here we have the “outside” that the world of consistency denies, and which it must deny to preserve its “tragic seriousness.” This realm of mercy is the realm of God. One can say it is “our eternal home,” glimpsed even now through the practice of mercy.

Yet importantly, this realm of mercy is not simply “Christianity,” in the sense of the visible church. For there too, no less than in “the world” so-called, the impulse to consistency and control constantly threatens. Characteristically, Merton concludes his essay by calling this out, as we can see in our final passage, number fourteen:

[14] “This is of course the ultimate temptation of Christianity! To say that Christ has locked all doors, has given one answer, settled everything and departed, leaving all life enclosed in the frightful consistency of a system outside of which there is seriousness and damnation, inside of which there is the intolerable flippancy of the saved – while nowhere is any place left for the mystery and freedom of divine mercy which alone is truly serious, and worthy of being taken seriously” (p. 33).

And so we can say: the confrontation between the world of consistency and the realm of mercy is not straightforwardly one between “the church” and “the world” – or even “the modern world.” Yet if the Church is to *be* the Church, and not just appear as such with polished consistency, it *will* be a community of mercy.

V

In conclusion, I would emphasize: it is not mistaken to call mercy a virtue. Aquinas does so, at length, and so did the ancient Romans. So do we. But from Merton, I believe, we learn that this is a partial way of speaking. In its fullness, the call to be a channel of divine mercy is not a call to cultivate a virtue. It is a call to *break* with what we conventionally regard as virtuous - and as sensible, rational, reasonable, even sane. It is a call not to be *unethical*, but to *surpass* the ethical, to

fulfill it, and to disrupt the taken-for-granted character of our morality, our politics, and our economy. It is a call to conversion and transformation.

In these texts from Merton, then, I submit, mercy appears not so much as a moral or ethical idea, but a *structural* idea: the *realm* of mercy is the eternal “outside” of our systems and structures and laws. It is their whence, their wherefore, and their sole justification. Through us, if we let it, mercy will flow into our world, upturn it, and make it new.

Pope Francis calls us to the practice of mercy. From the perspective we’ve found here in Merton, I think we can say this: this is not a call to be a more moral or ethical agent. That is a partial way of speaking. More, it is a call to be a more *open* agent, open to letting the primary agency of God flow through us, in ways and with results we can hardly imagine.